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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NIAMEY 000636

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SUBJECT: NIGER: AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH INTERIOR MINISTER

REF: (A) NIAMEY 625 (B) NIAMEY 607 (C) NIAMEY 483 (D)
NIAMEY 401

NIAMEY 00000636 001.4 OF 002

Classified By: Ambassador Bernadette M. Allen, reasons 1.4 (b/d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Interior Minister Abouba hinted that the GON was negotiating with dissident Tuaregs, but he largely dismissed their grievances. He feared alliances developing involving the Tuareg rebels, drug traffickers, AQIM and the Nigerian Taliban. He did not appear to be particularly seized with the recent student unrest. We suspect that the GON may be in discreet talks with the Tuareg rebels, but perhaps only to buy time while it prepares for a military offensive against them. End summary.

¶2. (C) Biographic note: Albade Abouba was named Minister of State in charge of the Interior and Decentralization on March ¶1. He has extensive experience in security matters, having previously served as Interior Minister (2002-2004), as well as President Tandja's National Security Advisor (2005-2007) and Special Advisor (1999-2002). He is familiar with the north and east from having served in various government posts in Diffa, Bilma and Arlit, as well as working as a mining engineer for the majority French-owned SOMAIR uranium mine. He is a Fulani from Tahoua and a member of the ruling MNSD party.

¶3. (C) Abouba began the meeting with Ambassador Allen and the DCM by complaining that he was not sure what was behind recent student unrest (ref c). If the issue was between students and professors over grades, he said he saw no role for the government. Similarly, disputes over university services was an issue between students and the university administration rather than a governmental responsibility. One of the student grievances was the reinstatement of a student who had been expelled, but Abouba said that the student had been caught burning down a professor's house.

¶4. (C) The Ambassador expressed concern about recent security incidents in the north (refs b and d), which had prompted the Embassy to warn Americans against traveling north of Agadez. She asked if the GON was negotiating with the dissident Tuareg group, the Mouvement des Nigériens pour la Justice (MNJ), to resolve the issue. Abouba spent the rest of the meeting carefully avoiding giving a direct answer to the question.

¶5. (C) Abouba said the problems began in the context of increased interest in mining in the north by Canadian,

Australian, French, Chinese and South African companies, as well as the long-standing drug trafficking networks from Morocco through Algeria, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad and Egypt to Europe. Nigeriens are not involved in the trafficking, he said, but sometimes act as guides and escorts for the traffickers.

¶6. (C) Abouba said the drug trafficking issue flared up in March when traffickers clashed with the army, leaving several traffickers dead. That same week, an MNJ web site appeared listing the MNJ's grievances (FYI: he is presumably referring to <http://m-n-j.blogspot.com>). Abouba said he knows the MNJ leadership well. None of them are capable of putting together two consecutive sentences in correct French, and therefore could not have authored the grievance message. The author must be someone outside of Niger, perhaps a Tuareg in California, Abouba speculated. The real issue, he said, was who has an interest in drug trafficking turning into a rebellion?

¶7. (C) Aboubou reviewed the four elements of the agreement ending the rebellion of the early 1990s:

-- Integration. He said 3,015 ex rebels were integrated into the security services.

-- Reinsertion. Donors have supported programs aimed at economic and social reinsertion of the ex-rebels.

-- Security and development in the north. A Saharan security corps consisting of three companies was formed to provide security in the north. Abouba added that the Nigerien military had worked with neighboring countries against the GSPC.

-- Decentralization. Abouba reviewed the GON actions to form local councils and elect members to them.

¶8. (C) These elements contributed to the end of the rebellion and the dissolution of the various rebel fronts, Abouba said.

NIAMEY 00000636 002.4 OF 002

Many leaders of the rebel fronts were given good government jobs. One reason for the current problems is that the front leaders packed the lists of ex-combatants with family and friends, and omitted some true front members. Some of the current rebels were those left off the lists who therefore did not receive benefits due them. Overall, however, Nigerien Tuaregs have it much better than their counterparts in Mali, Aboubou said, citing the difference in development between Iférouane (Niger) and Kidal (Mali). He claimed that some Nigerien Tuaregs will never be content.

¶9. (C) Dancing around the Ambassador's question about whether the GON is negotiating with the MNJ, Abouba said there are lots of opportunities for dialogue in Niger because everybody knows each other. For example, he said MNJ leader Alambo called on him after he was named minister. There is no desire for violence in Niger, and MNJ political demands are not really a problem. The GON has invested a lot in the north, although the mining companies should do more. He dismissed complaints about environmental issues associated with the uranium mines, saying an international group monitors the mines to ensure that they meet international standards. Besides, he claimed, the GON has no incentive to cover up environmental problems.

¶10. (C) Implicitly addressing MNJ complaints that Tuaregs are underrepresented in the mining workforce, Abouba claimed that 90 percent of the 250 Areva workers at a particular site are from the region. The problem is within the professional ranks. The mining companies would like to hire engineers and geologists from the region, but they cannot find them. He attributed this to the low value put on education by the traditional nomadic tribes such as the Toubou, Arabs, Fulani and Tuaregs. He conceded that the Chinese companies were

reluctant to hire even laborers locally, but said they would have to.

¶12. (C) Abouba ended the meeting by expressing his fear that AQIM or the Nigerian Taliban would link up with drug traffickers. The GON therefore needed help to fight trafficking, although Aboubou said he recognized that the drug issue was of much more concern to the Europeans than to the United States.

¶13. (C) Comment: We believe that the GON may indeed be negotiating with the MNJ, but suspect that the GON's strategy may be to use the negotiations to buy time while it prepares for a large scale offensive.

MINIMIZED CONSIDERED

ALLEN